

Oral Testimony of Molly Whitney, Executive Director, Cascade Forest Conservancy

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture, Subcommittee on Forestry and Horticulture

Reviewing Partnerships to Enhance Management of the National Forest System

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Chairman Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to join you today to discuss partnerships to enhance management of the National Forest System.

I am Molly Whitney, the Executive Director of the Cascade Forest Conservancy. For over 40 years, my organization has worked to protect and sustain the forests, streams, wildlife, and communities of the southern Washington Cascades through conservation, education, restoration, and advocacy.

Conservation NGOs like the Cascade Forest Conservancy provide oversight and accountability for actions impacting public lands. In the past, that role often put us at odds with the Forest Service and led to litigation. But today, we increasingly engage with the agency as a collaborative partner. We work closely with the Forest Service on forest management, watershed restoration, and economic resilience in southwest Washington.

My organization is an active and founding member of two collaboratives that have improved forest management and community outcomes throughout our region: the South Gifford Pinchot Collaborative and the Pinchot Partners. These forest collaboratives are stakeholder groups that provide feedback throughout Forest Service project planning to develop well-balanced, publicly supportable projects and iron out conflicts without slow, costly litigation.

Cascade Forest Conservancy also partners with the Forest Service to implement restoration projects, including aquatic habitat restoration, beaver relocations, volunteer programs, and an initiative that connects local high school students to paid summer internships on the national forest.

Today, this partnership is being strained through a multitude of cutbacks. Due to uncertainty, organizational restructuring, and staffing cuts originating at the national

level, our local Forest Service's ability to plan, collaborate, and execute projects effectively is being critically compromised.

On the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, there are vacancies in essential positions for project planning, and timber sale administration and implementation. The interdisciplinary planning teams, which are vital to advancing projects with expert input, decreased from 3 to 1. As a result, the agency's capacity to move projects forward has declined, even as production expectations increase.

At the same time, we are concerned about the agency's growing reliance on categorical exclusions (CEs), emergency declarations (ESDs), and exemptions from environmental review requirements. These tools have a role, but they are increasingly used as substitutes for comprehensive, transparent planning processes with public buy-in.

Environmental Assessments and the NEPA process provide meaningful opportunities for collaboration, public engagement, and tribal consultation. This helps project planners identify problems early, strengthen project design, and reduce the likelihood of conflict. In the absence of these processes, litigation becomes the only tool we have to ensure projects meet legal standards. Streamlining in specific situations can be helpful, but shortcuts that sacrifice transparency and public involvement may actually hinder progress and increase our reliance on litigation rather than on collaboration and public input.

Sustaining our public lands requires ongoing public input, strong federal agencies, and reliable public investment. Recent shifts, a lack of clarity, and a lack of transparent dialogue among stakeholders and agency staff have diminished public pathways for input. Forest collaboratives have always been useful, but they are now becoming even more essential as other public engagement avenues are limited. By creating a space, open to the public, for difficult conversations and non-traditional relationships, they promote shared understanding among diverse stakeholders, enhance project planning, and help prevent conflicts before decisions are made. While collaboration takes time, it builds trust, improves project outcomes, and often prevents costly disputes, making the process more efficient.

We encourage Congress to support stable, long-term investment in the Forest Service. This includes rebuilding agency capacity through sustainable, consistent funding, supporting collaborative processes, maintaining meaningful environmental review, and addressing long-standing infrastructure challenges, such as the Forest Service road maintenance backlog. Attempts have been made to address Forest Service capacity issues with partnerships like the Good Neighbor Authority, but while GNA can serve as

a useful tool, maintaining adequate Forest Service staffing remains the more efficient and accountable approach for carrying out forest management and restoration work on our federal public lands. Even for GNA to function at its intended capacity, the authority still requires Forest Service personnel to lead planning, provide oversight, and ensure projects align with broader management goals and public interests.

The dedicated staff on our national forests continue to do remarkable work under difficult circumstances. By providing them with adequate resources, consistent direction, and the tools needed to engage the public, we can improve forest health, increase wildfire resilience, support local economies, and ensure that our public lands are managed effectively for future generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.